



# Mazar-e Sharif & Northeastern Afghanistan



## مزار شریف و شمال شرق افغانستان

Travel north of the Hindu Kush and you'll find a quite different Afghanistan. The Central Asian steppe starts here, a wide grassy plain that stretches all the way to Russia. For much of its history, the Afghan city-states of the north looked across the Amu Darya towards Bukhara and Samarkand for their interests instead of to Kabul. Indeed, until the Salang Tunnel through the Hindu Kush was completed in the mid-1960s this was a totally isolated part of the country, accessible only by traversing the highest part of the mountains north of Kabul, or making a long desert crossing via Herat.

Travellers should head first for Mazar-e Sharif, home to the shimmering blue domes of the Shrine of Hazrat Ali. Nearby lies the far more ancient town of Balkh, where Zoroastrianism was born and Alexander the Great took his wife. His footprints can also be detected near the town of Kunduz at the ruins of Ai Khanoum, the easternmost Greek city in the world.

Continuing further east, the big mountains start to rise from the plains again in the province of Badakhshan. One of the remotest corners of the country, roads here become lost in the tangle of peaks where the Hindu Kush meet the Pamirs. The best way to get around is by foot, or with the yaks of the nomadic Kyrgyz who live in the thin tongue of land of the Wakhan Corridor, an area bursting with potential as a future trekking destination.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Join the pilgrims at the blue **Shrine of Hazrat Ali** (p152) in Mazar-e Sharif
- Head to **Balkh** (p155) to find the ruins of an ancient citadel and Afghanistan's oldest mosque
- Discover the unusual Buddhist temple and caves of **Takht-e Rostam** (p158) in Samangan
- Look for the remains of ancient Greeks at **Ai Khanoum** (p162) on the Tajikistan border
- Trek with yaks in the high altitude splendour of the **Wakhan Corridor** (p167)



## CLIMATE

The northern plains see extremes of temperature. Baking summers (up to 43°C) and freezing winters (occasionally down to -10°C) lead Mazar-e Sharif's citizens to joke about their *paka o posteen* ('fan or furcoat') climate. Spring and autumn are thankfully more temperate. Faizabad has a more moderate climate, although winter snows make travel in Badakhshan problematic between October/November and March/April. The high altitude Wakhan Corridor has warm days and near freezing nights even at the height of summer in July, while early snow effectively cuts the region off from the rest of Afghanistan from late September.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Regular flights with Ariana and Kam Air link Mazar-e Sharif to Kabul. Kam Air also operates a twice-weekly flight to Herat. Ariana runs an erratic schedule for Kabul services to Kunduz and Faizabad.

The Salang Tunnel connects the northern and southern halves of the country. The main highway from Kabul to Mazar-e Sharif

and on as far as Andkhoy is excellent, as is the road from the Pul-e Khumri junction to Kunduz and Taloqan. A 4WD is recommended for travel to Faizabad, and is essential further into Badakhshan. There are two border crossings between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, at Shir Khan Bandar (near Kunduz) and Ishkashim (in Badakhshan). The border with Uzbekistan at Termez is open, and with sufficient paperwork it's just about possible to trek from Badakhshan into Pakistan over the Dilisang Pass.

## MAZAR-E SHARIF

مزار شریف

☎ 050 / pop 800,000

Mazar-e Sharif is north Afghanistan's sprawling urban centre, a relatively modern city standing on the wide steppes near the border with Uzbekistan. Compared to some of the neighbouring towns it's a relative youngster, and was long overshadowed by the power and prestige of its neighbour

## NORTHEASTERN AFGHANISTAN



Balkh. It took the dreams of a group of 12th century noblemen to change that, when they claimed to have found the hidden tomb of Ali, the Prophet Mohammed's son-in-law, buried in a local village. Balkh declined and Mazar-e Sharif grew as a place of pilgrimage. Its shrine today is the focus of the national Nauroz celebrations. For travellers, it has plenty of amenities, and is a good base for the sights of Balkh (p155) and Samangan (p158).

Mazar-e Sharif is a mixed city, with large populations of Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras (many Pashtuns fled after reprisals following the collapse of the Taliban). This cultural mix is represented in the city's culture, in everything from the Central Asian flavours on the menu in restaurants, to the comparatively liberal attitudes to women's education. Mazar-e Sharif is even the centre for a women's musical college – something unthinkable elsewhere in the country.

The city's location also means that it is a great centre for that true Afghan sport of the plains, *buzkashi*. Games can be seen most weekends throughout the winter until

## RISK ASSESSMENT

Mazar-e Sharif has been the centre of turf wars between Uzbek and Tajik interests, but was quiet as we went to press. The main highway through Balkh Province regularly reports robberies, and the crime rate has increased of late.

In the northeast, the areas around Kunduz and Taloqan have seen worrying signs of deterioration, with roadside Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and alleged infiltration of anti-government elements. Badakhshan is largely calm, although tensions exist between opium producers and eradication efforts, resulting in the targeting of some internationals involved in anti-opium programmes.

the Afghan New Year. Mazar-e Sharif becomes flooded with visitors at this time, for the annual Nauroz celebrations (see boxed text, p152). Nauroz coincides with the Gul-e Surkh festival, named for the red tulips that flower on the steppe, which are associated with prosperity and fertility.

Mazar-e Sharif mostly sat out the recent wars that afflicted Afghanistan, but its outward prosperity masks deeper political problems. In the post-Taliban environment, the city became a case study of Afghanistan's warlord problem, with rival Uzbek and Tajik strongmen jostling for power and control of revenues from natural gas reserves and the cross-border trade with Uzbekistan. At the time of writing, the situation was stable, but political competition still occasionally sparks into violence. The presence of a NATO Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT; led by the UK and now Sweden) has helped calm tensions.

## HISTORY

Mazar-e Sharif was the nondescript village of Khairan in the shadow of Balkh until the miraculous dream that revealed the location of Ali's tomb. A town quickly grew around the shrine, attracting many pilgrims until the Mongol's Year Zero levelled the area, pushing it to the margins of Afghan history for several hundred years. Mazar-e Sharif only regained its status when Ali's shrine was rebuilt in the last years of the Timurid empire. Since then, the town grew steadily until it





eventually eclipsed Balkh, and was declared the capital of Afghan Turkestan in 1866.

Although Mazar-e Sharif was one of the birthplaces for the political parties that would eventually form the Northern Alliance, it was a Soviet stronghold during the 1980s. The flat plains surrounding the city made it easily defensible, and the shops and garrisons were well stocked with goods from across the Soviet border, only 60km away.

After the Russians pulled out, the defence of Mazar-e Sharif was entrusted to the semi-autonomous Uzbek militias led by General Abdul Rashid Dostum (p145). When Dostum mutinied against the government in 1992, setting up shop as the local power broker, he quickly gained control over most of north Afghanistan and prompted the fall of Kabul into the bargain.

Mazar-e Sharif was the capital of Dostum's private kingdom, bankrolled by the north's gas reserves and with a line of credit from newly independent Uzbekistan. He only left to play kingmaker in Kabul, and then shelved it when his plans came to naught. Mazar-e Sharif remained an oasis of peace in the anarchy of the 1990s. By mid-decade its population had swelled to nearly two million by refugees from other parts of the country, as well as those fleeing the civil war in nearby Tajikistan. Balkh University opened, soon the only university offering higher education to women.

The Taliban were soon knocking on the door. They cut a secret deal with one of Dostum's generals and swept into the city in May 1997. This event triggered the Taliban's international recognition as the legitimate government of Afghanistan by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. But just a day later the population (led largely by Hazara militia) rose in revolt and drove them out. Having sat out nearly 20 years of war, Mazar-e Sharif started to slide into chaos. The Taliban were back within the year with revenge on their minds. Hazaras were rounded up and summarily executed; their bodies were left lying in the street for five days to be eaten by dogs. Around 5000 people were killed.

Mazar-e Sharif was the first city to be abandoned by the Taliban in the US-led attacks of November 2001. Dostum returned again, this time on the US payroll. His old fort on the outskirts of the city, Qala-e Jangi, was the site of a notorious Taliban

prisoner revolt. In response, his troops packed subsequent Taliban prisoners into shipping containers, asphyxiating as many as 3000 men.

But years in exile had returned a diminished figure in Dostum. Mazar-e Sharif was parcelled up by the resurgent Northern Alliance, and it soon became clear that the Tajiks had the upper hand. Dostum has now ceded control of the city and province to the Tajik governor, Atta Mohammed.

## ORIENTATION

Sitting in a large park in the centre of the city, the Shrine of Hazrat Ali dominates Mazar-e Sharif. Four main roads radiate out from the shrine to the cardinal points. Most amenities for travellers can be found within a kilometre of the shrine. Mazar-e Sharif has no historic quarter to speak of; the old bazaars that surrounded the shrine were torn down in the 1960s when the area was redeveloped.

The airport is 10km east of Mazar-e Sharif. Transport to Kabul and all points south and east leave from the Ah Deh depot 3km east of the centre. Transport west departs from a series of smaller stands on the road to Balkh.

## INFORMATION

### Emergency

**ANSO North** (☎ 070 030 064/079 9404 617)

**Fire Brigade** (☎ 079 9202 420)

**ISAF** (☎ 079 9639 135)

**Police** (☎ 079 9255 000)

### Internet

Expect to pay around 60Afg per hour.

**Bakhtar Net** (Darwaza-ye Balkh)

**Dunya Internet Club** (Chowk-e Shadian) In same building as Amo Hotel.

**Shahin Net Café** (behind Farhat Hotel, Darwaza-ye Balkh) Very high-speed connection.

### Medical Services

**Mazar Hospital** (☎ 070 503 600; Charahi Sidiqiyar)

**Military Hospital** (☎ 070 501 881; Dosad Bistar)

### Money

There are moneychangers' stalls along the street west of the shrine. Currencies for all Afghanistan's neighbours are available.

**Kabul Bank** (Darwaza-ye Balkh) Has a branch of Western Union inside.

## Post & Telephone

There are plenty of phone stands and PCOs on the four main streets surrounding the shrine.

**Post Office** (Chowk-e Mukharabat)

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Although Atta Mohammed has gained a firm hand on Mazar-e Sharif, factional disputes do occasionally break into outbursts of violence, so it's essential to keep your ear to the ground.

## SIGHTS

### Shrine of Hazrat Ali

The twin blue domes of the **Shrine of Hazrat Ali** (☞ dawn-dusk, Wed women only) are one of Afghanistan's most iconic sights, and pilgrims come from across the country to pay their respects at the tomb contained inside. Although non-Muslims are forbidden entry to the shrine building itself, views of the building are to be much enjoyed from the pleasant park that surrounds the complex.

Popular Muslim tradition contends that the Ali is buried in Najaf in Iraq, near the site where he was murdered in 661AD. Afghans typically tell another story. Instead, Ali's followers reputedly took his body to be secretly buried near Balkh. The burial was carried out in secret for fear of reprisals from Ali's enemies, and its location was lost until the 12th century when Ali appeared simultaneously in the dreams of 400 nobles from Balkh to reveal the tomb's exact position. A nearby hill was excavated, to dis-

cover a tomb chamber behind a steel door. Ali's body lay behind it, his mortal wounds as fresh as they day he received them.

The Seljuk Sultan Sanjar immediately built a large shrine above the tomb, but it was razed a century later by Genghis Khan. With Balkh's population decimated and scattered, memories of Ali's tomb faded until revived by the Timurids in the 15th century. Sultan Baiqara rebuilt the shrine that still stands today.

The rich blue tiling that covers every surface of the shrine is modern. The Timurid decoration fell into disrepair and the building was covered with a simple whitewash until the 1860s when it was restored by Sher Ali Khan, the amir swept away by the start of the Second Anglo-Afghan War.

Sher Ali Khan's tomb is to the west of the main shrine door. A larger tomb next door is that of the other great scourge of the British, Wazir Akbar Khan, who died three years after driving the British Army out of the country in their disastrous retreat from Kabul in 1842. On the east side of the shrine is a tall minaret-like pigeon tower. The doves in the shrine complex are famous across Afghanistan. Every seventh pigeon is said to contain a spirit, and the site is so holy that if a grey pigeon flies here it turns white within 40 days.

There is no entrance fee to the shrine complex, although guards on the southern gate sometimes ask for a spurious 'camera fee'. Beggars and mendicants flock to the site, equally demanding of your attention.

## NAUROZ IN MAZAR-E SHARIF

The Shrine of Hazrat Ali is the centre of Afghanistan's Nauroz celebrations, and people have traditionally converged on the city from across the country for the holiday. Banned by the Taliban as being unIslamic, over a million people attended the first Nauroz in 2002 following their overthrow. Numbers have since dwindled to a more manageable 100,000.

On the morning of 21 March, huge numbers of people converge on the shrine to witness the raising of the *janda*, a large religious banner. It flies for 40 days, with people crowding to touch it for blessings. Tradition holds that the seriously ill can be cured by praying at the shrine during Nauroz. In the afternoon the provincial government hosts a *buzkashi* match, on the *meidan* (plain) on the southern outskirts of the city.

Since 2004 the **Foundation for Culture & Civil Society** ([www.afghanfcs.org](http://www.afghanfcs.org)) has hosted the Gul-e Sorkh International Music Festival in Mazar-e Sharif, with free music concerts across the city featuring musicians from across Afghanistan and its neighbours.

The crowds are huge and although security is tight you should watch out for pickpockets. Accommodation is at a premium and should be reserved well in advance, but if you can get a room, Nauroz is a fantastically exciting time to be in Mazar-e Sharif.

## SLEEPING

Although there is a host of cheap hotels in Mazar-e Sharif, particularly on the western side of the shrine, at the time of research they were not allowed to take foreign guests.

**Amo Hotel** (☎ 050 2478; Chowk-e Shadian; s/d/tr US\$10/20/30) This is a well-located cheapie, directly opposite the south entrance to the shrine: many of the rooms have great views across the domes. The rooms need a lick of paint, and the hot showers never seem to be more than lukewarm, but it's the best budget choice in town.

**Aria Hotel** (☎ 070 509 945; Darwaza-ye Shadian; s/d US\$10/20) Just around the corner from the Amo, the decor here seems even more peeling. The shared bathrooms (squat toilet only) leave something to be desired, but the rooms themselves are light and airy. It's poorly signed – look for the sign on the corner of the building, although the entrance is actually upstairs from the main street.

**Barat Hotel** (☎ 070 502 235; Chowk-e Mukharabat; r US\$30-50; ☺) A much more modern hotel, with carpeted rooms, squashy beds and decent furniture. Bathrooms are shared but are kept spotlessly clean and have lashings of hot water. Rooms on the upper floors are nicer, and are more expensive; management also ask for more if you want a view of the shrine. There's no restaurant, but food can be delivered to your room from nearby chaikhana.

**Mazar Hotel** (☎ 050 2703/070 159 483; Darwaza-ye Balkh; r US\$30-50; ☺) This is a hotel in 1930s style, all high ceilings, grand dining rooms and monolithic pillars. It's a little dusty, giving the impression that it doesn't see all that many guests, but the swimming pool is popular with local lads in the summer. En suite rooms are a flat price for single or double occupancy, and have the novelty of a bath as well as shower.

**Farhat Hotel** (☎ 070 503177; Darwaza-ye Balkh; r US\$50; ☺) Staff instruct you to leave your shoes at the front door; inside it's all overstuffed furniture, bright carpets and fake sunflowers, trying their best to dispel the slightly gloomy post-Soviet atmosphere. Rooms are good nonetheless, all en suite, and there's a fast internet café next door.

**Royal Oak Hotel** (☎ 0799383 127; sebroad3@hotmail.com; next to Governor's house, Darwaza-ye Balkh; s/d US\$50-70/90, s/d with bathroom US\$80/100; ☺) In

the style of a Kabul guesthouse, the Royal Oak is aimed squarely at the international contractor market. High security walls contain a cosy house with annexe, comfortable decent-sized rooms, plus a large lounge and dining area. It's all run with great efficiency and has a good restaurant.

## EATING & DRINKING

*Mantu* (steamed meat dumplings) are popular in Mazar-e Sharif, so take a break from kebabs and *pulao*. The vegetarian option, *ashak*, is also available. Central Asian influences are also apparent in the bread, which comes in heavy round loaves rather than the usual flat nan.

**Delhi Darbar** (☎ 070 505 417; Dosad Bistar; mains from US\$4; ☺ 11am-10pm) This trusty Indian restaurant is something of an institution among Mazar-e Sharif's expats. The menu is mainly north Indian cuisine, with a refreshing choice of vegetable dishes. The meat/vegetarian *thalis* (South Indian all-you-can-eat meal) are excellent at US\$6. Eat inside, or in the walled garden in summer, enjoying a cold beer at the same time. There's a sister branch in Kabul.

**Pisarni Hamidi Restaurant** (Darwaza-ye Shadian; dishes from 50Afg) One of the better chaikhana near the shrine, this basic place has good *mantu* amid the expected piles of meat and rice – a reliable standard.

**Ibn Sina Restaurant** (Near Royal Oak Hotel, Darwaza-ye Balkh; dishes from 60Afg; ☺ 10.30am-11pm) An Afghan place worth making the effort to get to, the Ibn Sina has a well-stocked menu including *mantu*, *ashak* and a variety of soups and *qorma*. The white tiles give it a canteen appearance, but you can spread out on the *takhts* (raised seats) as well as sitting at tables. The restaurant's sign is fairly inconspicuous, so look out for the big tree outside the entrance.

**Bahaar Restaurant** (Kheyaban-e Nasir Khusrau; dishes from 70Afg) There aren't so many surprises at this restaurant in terms of the menu, but it's better quality than most, with several interesting *pulao* and *qorma* on offer. With the restaurant on three glitzy storeys above its own supermarket, this is about as fancy as Afghan dining gets in Mazar-e Sharif.

**Grilled Chicken** (Kheyaban-e Nasir Khusrau; meals from 70Afg) A seemingly endless round of kebabs and *pulao* can get pretty boring at times,



something this place addresses wonderfully, with great chunks of delicious barbecued chicken. Next to the Bahaar Supermarket, there's a small off-street seating area hidden behind a wicker screen where you can tuck in.

**Royal Oak Hotel Restaurant** (☎ 079 9383 127; next to Governor's house, Darwaza-ye Balkh; dishes from US\$8) Worth a splurge if you're missing some home comforts, this guesthouse restaurant has a changing daily menu, with anything from lasagne and risotto to some generous club sandwiches. Alcohol is served, and there's even a full English breakfast for US\$10, complete with sausages and marmalade. Non-guests are advised to call before arriving.

**Tashkent** (Chowk-e Mukharabat; dishes from 100Afg) In the middle of the divided road, this is an Afghan fast-food place that delivers exactly what is promised. The pizzas (200Afg) aren't bad, but the burgers (110Afg) are tastier, served with a handful of chips.

**Ice cream shops** (Chowk-e Mukharabat; bowl of ice cream from 20Afg) If you're hankering for dessert, head here for a bowl of thick hand-churned ice cream, piled high in tiny bowls. There are a couple of un-named shops – several locals claimed that the one with the flame decor serves the best ice cream in the north.

**Juice stands** (Chowk-e Shadian; juice from 20Afg) This cluster of juice stands are a great refreshment stop. The banana or mango smoothies with cream and chopped almonds make a breakfast in themselves, while the sharp lemonade will cool you down on a scorching summer day.

The perimeter of the shrine usually has plenty of stalls selling street snacks – look out for those cooking up tasty *boloni* (stuffed vegetable pancakes) and *falafel*. You can fill yourself for less than 30Afg. Self-caterers will find fresh produce in the market on the northwest corner of the shrine, around Chowk-e Mandawi. **Nasrat Supermarket** (Chowk-e Shadian) is well stocked for imported goods.

## SHOPPING

Mazar-e Sharif is an excellent place to pick up *gilims* (woven carpets) and needlework, the traditional handicrafts of north Afghanistan. Most of these are Uzbek, while the carpets tend to be made by Turkmen. *Suzanis* (spreads embroidered with

either silk or wool) make particularly good souvenirs.

There is a line of carpet shops along the east side of the shrine, stocked high with rugs, embroidery, lapis lazuli, and antiques (old and new). Prices are slightly cheaper than Kabul and the sell isn't so hard.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Both airline offices are opposite the Iranian consulate. **Ariana Afghan Airlines** (☎ 075 5010 075; Kheyaban-e Nasir Khusrau) flies to Kabul (2500Afg, 40 minutes) on Tuesday, Friday and Sunday. **Kam Air** (☎ 070 513 030; Kheyaban-e Nasir Khusrau) were starting a service to match at the time of writing, but also fly between Mazar-e Sharif and Herat (2500Afg, 50 minutes) every Monday and Thursday.

Transport for all points south and east leaves from the Ah Deh depot on the eastern outskirts of the city. Minibuses leave from early morning throughout the day to Kabul (500Afg, eight hours), Samangan (120Afg, two hours), Pul-e Khumri (200Afg, 3½ hours) and Kunduz (350Afg, five hours). Shared taxis are equally plentiful. Transport also leaves from here to the Uzbek border at Hairatan – for more information see p217.

Transport offices on Darwaza-ye Balkh near the shrine sell tickets for large buses to Kabul (400Afg, nine hours). The vehicles aren't as fancy as advertised. The services continue to Herat (1000Afg, two days), but as these travel via Kandahar and the southern highway warzone they should be avoided.

Shared taxis to Balkh (30Afg, 30 minutes) depart from Charahi Haji Ayoub. Minibuses and shared taxis to Shiberghan (100Afg, two hours), Andkhoy (150Afg, 3½ hours) and Maimana (400Afg, eight hours) leave from near the Kefayat Wedding Club in the west of Mazar-e Sharif.

It's possible to travel to Herat via Maimana in a three-day burst, but this is only for the most hardcore and is subject to serious security concerns – see p142 for more details. An office on the east side of the shrine sells seats for the three-day Landcruiser trip for 1400Afg. The unmarked office can be hard to find – it's on the corner, on the 1st floor on the left – ask at the offices selling the big buses to Kabul. As the road effectively finishes two hours

from Mazar-e Sharif at Shiberghan, breaking the journey at Maimana is strongly recommended.

## GETTING AROUND

There is no public transport to the airport. The 15-minute taxi ride costs 200Afg. As Mazar-e Sharif is a compact city, and you're unlikely to stray too far on foot from the general vicinity of the shrine complex, a taxi to most destinations within the city should weigh in at around 80Afg.

# AROUND MAZAR-E SHARIF

## BALKH

بلخ

Today little more than a provincial market town, Balkh was once of such stature that the Arabs dubbed it the 'Mother of Cities'. Nowhere in Afghanistan has such a glorious history as Balkh, and its remaining sights are well worth the short trip from Mazar-e Sharif.

The town is possibly the oldest recorded in the country. Some Islamic traditions have Balkh being founded by Noah after the great flood, but it is better recognised as the birthplace of Zoroaster, founder of the world's first monotheistic religion. The record is hazy here – the best estimates have him being born around the 6th century BC. The town of Bactra was established enough to be a satrapy of the Achaemenid empire

by the time Alexander the Great took on the Persians two centuries later.

Balkh was the scene of Persia's last stand against the Greeks, with the Bactrian ruler Bessus claiming the Achaemenid crown from the fleeing Darius, only to be killed in turn by Alexander in 329. Alexander's men were horrified by Balkh – Zoroastrian beliefs forbade burial or cremation to avoid polluting the earth, so the Greeks took control of a city roaming with packs of 'devourer dogs' who disposed of the recent dead. Balkh served as the forward base for Alexander's Central Asian campaigns, and it was here that he married Roxane, adding Afghan blood to the royal lineage, as well as declaring his own divinity.

After Alexander, Balkh was the centre of a succession of Graeco-Bactrian dynasties who held sway over the region until falling to the nomadic Kushans. Balkh prospered as a way station on the new Silk Road, with its people turning to Buddhism.

When the Arabs brought Islam to Afghanistan, Balkh was rich. They, and the Bukharans after them endowed it with fine mosques and palaces, and the city enjoyed a reputation as one of the great centres of Islamic learning.

Rumi, one of the most celebrated of Sufi saints, was born in Balkh, although fled the city in the face of the Mongol onslaught of 1220. When Marco Polo passed through 50 years later he still found the city 'despoiled and ruined'. Balkh never recovered its glory, despite a brief hurrah under Timurid rule.

## BALKH AND THE WEED

What Helmand Province is to opium poppies, Balkh Province is to cannabis. The distinctive plants can be seen growing everywhere, and are particularly visible on the road between Balkh and Mazar-e Sharif, often grown as a thick hedge around the cotton fields. Baba Koo-i Mastan ('the divine mad-man'), a pre-Islamic holy man from Bactria, is credited with being the first to refine hashish, and his tomb near Balkh is still visited by locals and tended by a dope-smoking *malang* (holy man).

The smoking of *charas* (cannabis) has a long tradition in Afghanistan, and although illegal the drug is widely available. An especially potent variety called *shirac* is produced only in Balkh. It needs little irrigation, making it ideal for the dry province, and although farmers earn roughly a quarter of what they would if they grew poppies, it has a short growing season and harvesting is less labour intensive. And of course, it's a lot more profitable than growing regular crops.

The Taliban banned the cultivation and smoking of *charas* but since the end of 2001, farmers have returned to it in a big way, taking advantage of the lack of governmental control, and the West's preoccupation with opium. The provincial authorities are occasionally prompted by Kabul to eradicate cannabis, but these efforts seem tokenistic at best. With such a long tradition behind him, Baba Koo-i Mastan can sleep soundly in his grave for the foreseeable future.

As nearby Mazar-e Sharif prospered, Balkh struggled through the centuries until cholera and malaria forced a large-scale abandonment in the mid-19th century.

## Orientation

The main road from Mazar-e Sharif turns right into Balkh through the old city walls. Opposite the intersection are two large mounds, Takht-e Rostam and Teppe Rostam, ancient Buddhist stupas, probably from around the 4th century AD. The former once held a tooth of the Buddha; the latter now has a tank parked atop it. There are shops and a taxi stand at the junction.

The centre of Balkh is 2km north past the ancient walls, where the unpaved road

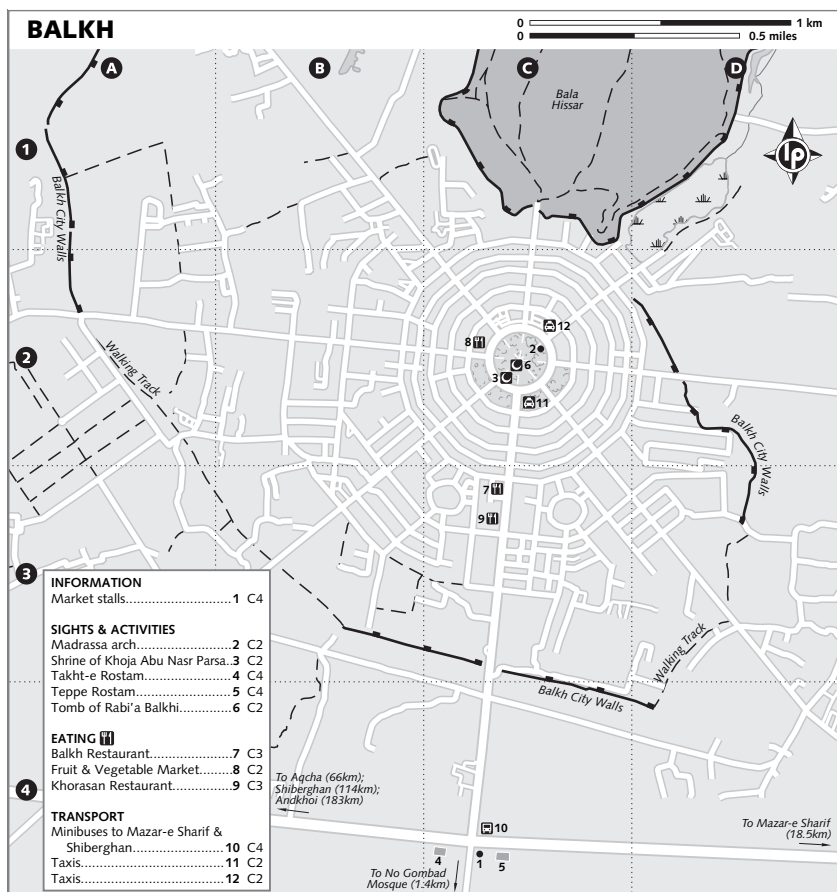
meets a large park containing the Shrine of Khoja Abu Nasr Parsa. The Bala Hissar sits in farmland 1.5km south of the junction.

## Sights

### SHRINE OF KHOJA ABU NASR PARSA

Standing proud in Balkh's central park, this shrine ('Khoja Parsa' for short) is a classic example of Timurid architecture, as well as a symbol of Balkh's final flourish before sliding into permanent decline.

It was built in the 1460s and dedicated to a famous theologian at the court of Sultan Baiqara who had retired to Balkh. The shrine is dominated by its monumental portal entrance, flanked with twisted cable pillars and



decorated in blue mosaic. The stumps of two minarets stand behind the facade. The shrine is topped with a turquoise ribbed melon dome sitting on a high drum decorated with Quranic verses. Although much of the tile-work is damaged, the building as a whole remains quite astounding.

The door is normally kept locked, but it's worth getting inside if possible. The inner dome stands 29m high above a breath-taking octagonal chamber, supported with internal arches. Light filters through screen windows in the dome's drum, picking out the subtle rust-red and blue decoration.

Attached to the right of the shrine is a modern madrassa (Islamic school). The shrine was damaged in an earthquake in the 1990s and has recently undergone repair to the dome.

On the northeast edge of the park, and largely hidden by trees, is an impressive arch, all that remains of the 17th century Madrassa of Sayid Subhna Quli Khan. Much ruined, it still has traces of blue Timurid-influenced tiling on the interior. The park is a pleasant place to sit and people-watch.

#### TOMB OF RABI'A BALKHI

Opposite the shrine of Khoja Abu Nasr Parsa is the small yellow-tiled tomb of Rabi'a Balkhi. Born in 9th century Balkh, she is credited as the first (and greatest) woman to write poetry in Persian. Her verses are read for their mystical and often erotic undertones. Rabi'a Balkhi fell in love with her slave, and was punished by her brother by being bricked up in a dungeon. She slashed her wrists and wrote her most famous poem – a bitter testament to doomed love – in her own blood on the walls of the prison.

The tomb was rediscovered in 1964, and is a popular place to visit for young women with romantic designs.

#### BALA HISSAR & CITY WALLS

The massive ramparts of the fortress of Bala Hissar stand guard on the northern edge of the city. The current fort was built by the Timurid in the 15th century on the site of an older citadel. The eroding mud-brick gives the place a much more ancient atmosphere. It's easy to imagine this as the location of Alexander's wedding feast to Roxane, or the fort's luckless defenders being swept away by Genghis Khan's hordes.

Others have had similar thoughts, and the fort is an uneven moonscape of robber holes, dug by locals looking for treasure. Small potsherds, many brightly painted are littered everywhere. There is some nominal protection, but farmers still dig every winter in the area, hoping for some old glass beads or Graeco-Bactrian coins to sell to dealers in Mazar-e Sharif and supplement their meagre incomes.

The ramparts give an interesting view across Balkh, with its repeated series of walled compounds. One surprise is how green Balkh appears from above. The towering dome of Khoja Parsa is barely visible through the tops of the trees in the park.

The city walls, 12km around, can also be appreciated from this height, snaking towards the highway. The footpaths following the line of the walls are worth exploring.

#### NO GOMBAD MOSQUE

This ruined 9th-century mosque is thought to be the oldest in Afghanistan. The name refers to its originally nine-domed structure, an unusual design rarely encountered in Islamic architecture. It's also known locally as Masjid-e Haji Piyada ('Mosque of the Walking Pilgrim'), for a local pilgrim.

Today, little more than the mosque's arcade piers remain, the columns and arches standing free from a raised earth floor that has never been excavated. The decoration is a delight of carved stucco, the whole covered with arabesques, scrolls and abstract geometric designs. The style shows the influence of similar buildings in Samarra in Iraq, presumably a reflection of recently converted Balkh's connections with the ruling caliphate.

The whole site is in need of consolidation, and is covered with a metal canopy and surrounded by a perimeter mud-brick wall. The mosque is still used by local villagers for prayers and sermons on Fridays, so try to avoid visiting at this time. There is a friendly *chowkidar* (caretaker) on site who appreciates a small donation, and will show off his prize pigeons given half the chance.

The mosque lies a 1.5km walk south of the intersection for Balkh on the road from Mazar-e Sharif. The metal canopy is easily spotted from the path, rising clear from the fields of marijuana that surround the site (see boxed text, p155).

## Sleeping & Eating

There are no hotels in Balkh, which is close enough to Mazar-e Sharif to make a day trip the best option. There are a few chaikhans on the main road from the highway to the park: the Balkh Restaurant and Khorasan Restaurant offer *pulao*, *shorwa* (soup) and kebabs. For the desperate, there would probably be a space on the floor to sleep for the price of dinner.

There's a fruit and vegetable market on the northern edge of the main park.

## Getting There & Around

Share taxis run throughout the day to Balkh from Mazar-e Sharif (30Afg, 30 minutes), and leave in the opposite direction from either a stand on the main highway or one on the eastern edge of the park. Hiring a taxi for the return trip (including sightseeing) should cost 300Afg to 400Afg.

Balkh is small enough to explore by foot, although there are horse-drawn *garis* should the mood take you.

# MAZAR-E SHARIF TO BADAQHSAN

## مزار شریف الی بدخشان

The road from Mazar-e Sharif to Badaqhsan performs a large V, heading south past Tashkurgan and Samangan to the junction town of Pul-e Khumri. Here it switches north towards Kunduz before leaving the plains and climbing into the mountains of the far northeast.

## TASHKURGAN

## تاشقورغان

The old bazaar town of Tashkurgan, 60km from Mazar-e Sharif, would once have been a key stopping-off point for any traveller to Afghanistan. Sometimes also known by its old name of Khulm, Tashkurgan was the site of the last traditional covered bazaar in the country, a wonderful maze of mud-brick streets and stalls that put visitors firmly in touch with Marco Polo and the Silk Road. The bazaar was levelled during the war, another sad testament to the recent destruction visited on Afghanistan's culture. Little remains for the modern traveller to see, except a small palace built by Abdur

Rahman Khan in the late 19th century in Indian colonial style.

Maps show a road heading due east from Tashkurgan to Kunduz, but this is not used, being in complete disrepair and reportedly mined. All traffic heads south instead. The highway passes through the stupendous gorge of Tangi Tashkurgan, where the mountains suddenly loom from the plains and enclose the road in sheer walls 300m high. In summer, watch out for the impromptu fruit stalls here – the local pomegranates and figs are delicious.

## SAMANGAN (AIBAK) سمنگان (ایبک)

Samangan is an ancient town in a valley of rich farmland where the Hindu Kush starts to meet the Central Asian steppe. It was already old when the Arabs and Mongols visited, having been a major Buddhist centre under the Kushans in the 4th and 5th centuries AD. The remains of this site, Takht-e Rostam, sit on a hill above the town.

The town was a medieval caravan stop known as Aibak, a name many locals still use today. Samangan still holds a sizeable weekly market every Thursday and is noted for its craftsmen who make traditional Afghan musical instruments such as the *dutar* (two-stringed lute) and *zirbaghali* (a drum made from pottery). Ask for the Bazaar-e Danbora Faroshi (Lute-Sellers' bazaar).

Samangan's bread is equally renowned – round Uzbek loaves that are sold by the roadside to vehicles travelling between Mazar-e Sharif and Kabul. There is a large Uzbek population in the town, and you can see pictures of General Dostum on display.

The town sits just west of the main highway, with the road into town leading to the main square and bazaar. Takht-e Rostam is 3km to the southwest, a 100Afg ride in an autorickshaw. There are no decent hotels in town, but it's an easy day trip from Mazar-e Sharif.

## Takht-e Rostam

The remains of this **Buddhist stupa and monastery** (entry 250Afg) are one of the most unexpected sights in Afghanistan. On a hill above Samangan, they offer a commanding view of the valley below.

High on the rise is a well-preserved stupa – one of the earliest forms of Buddhist architecture, simple mounds raised to

### THE LEGEND OF ROSTAM

Rostam is one of the great heroes of Persian literature, immortalised in the epic *Shah Nama* (Book of Kings) by the Ghaznavid court poet Firdausi in the 10th century. Something of a giant, Rostam was born by caesarean section overseen by a mythical bird, and performed many great feats in his life accompanied by his equally heroic horse Rakhsh, including the slaying of a terrible dragon. But like a Shakespearean hero, Rostam's story is tinged with tragedy. His son Sohrab, who was born in Samangan, grew up alone and only met his father on the field of battle, where Rostam killed him in a case of mistaken identity. Rostam himself died at the hands of his treacherous brother Shaghad.

Many unusual rock formations in Afghanistan are accredited as the sites of the hero's achievements – look out for other Takht-e Rostams elsewhere in the country.

contain relics of the Buddha. What makes Takht-e Rostam highly unusual is that instead of being built up, the 28m stupa has been carved out of the rock so is completely below ground level. The trench that surrounds the bowl of rock is around 8m deep, giving some sense of the scale of the work involved chiselling it out.

On top of the stupa is a carved stone building, a *harmika* that would have held the site's relics. The roof has a hole dug into it to hold a ceremonial umbrella. Since the passing of Buddhism, folklore has dubbed this the Takht-e Rostam – the Throne of Rostam. The legendary king (see above) reportedly married his bride Tahmina here, daughter of the king of Samangan. The hole of the roof allegedly held the wine for the wedding feast. Tahmina later went on to bear Rostam's doomed son, Sohrab. An information board adds more information, including the vital nugget that the site was built 'in the early years of Christmas'.

A path leads down to a cave entrance to the bottom of the stupa, allowing visitors to circumambulate the stupa (clockwise, according to Buddhist tradition).

Below the stupa is a series of five caves, again excavated from the rock. They're reminiscent of the monks' cells in Bamiyan, but on a much grander scale. The first cave has a 12m-high domed ceiling, carved with a huge lotus flower partially hidden by soot. This is followed by a wider cave with two long galleries with vaulted ceilings. There are individual cells that were used as retreats for meditation; the light filtering in through the carved windows does indeed give it a serene atmosphere.

The third cave is the largest in scope and finest in execution. An antechamber leads

into an immense domed room. Roughly square, each wall has a niche that would have contained a Buddha statue, and topped with a carved column. The corners of the room have carved arches to support the great dome, as in a modern mosque. A hole in the ceiling bathes the room in a gentle light.

The fourth cave is a series of small rooms with a carved pool, thought to be a bathhouse. The final cave next to it is most likely a toilet, and is filled with rubble.

### Getting There & Away

Samangan's transport depot is on the junction with the Kabul-Mazar-e Sharif highway. There are plenty of minibuses and shared taxis throughout the day to Mazar-e Sharif (110Afg, two hours), Pul-e Khumri (80Afg, 1½ hours) and Kabul (300Afg, five hours).

### PUL-E KHUMRI

پلخمری

All travellers in northern Afghanistan will pass through Pul-e Khumri at least once. It's a large (and largely nondescript) town on a wide flood plain perfect for agriculture. There's not much reason to stop in the town itself, although in winter people occasionally get stranded here if the Salang Pass is closed. The Russian-built cement factory is the town's major attraction. Around 12km north of Pul-e Khumri is the Kushan Buddhist site of Surkh Kotal (see boxed text, p160).

There are no decent hotels in Pul-e Khumri, although the Zadrán Hotel would do in a pinch. For onward transport, minibuses and taxis to Mazar-e Sharif (200Afg, 3½ hours) and Kunduz (100Afg, 1½ hours) depart from a depot where the highway

## SURKH KOTAL

The acropolis of Surkh Kotal was built around AD 130 for the Kushan ruler Kanishka; it comprised a series of terraces built into the hillside overlooking the Anderab river. Kanishka was the greatest of Kushan kings, ruling from his capital in Kapisa (modern day Bagram) as far as Gujarat in southern India. He was a Buddhist king who traded with Rome and China, and whose art was influenced by Persia and ancient Greece.

Excavated in the 1950s, little now remains at Surkh Kotal of the marble staircase and fluted columns found at the site, lost to war and looters. Archaeology buffs will get the most out of a visit, although the views over the valley remain tremendous. Two important relics from Surkh Kotal can be seen at the Kabul Museum (p88): the remains of a statue of Kanishka, smashed by the Taliban but now restored, and a large tablet inscribed in Greek that would have been part of a temple sanctuary.

splits in the three major directions. Vehicles to Kabul (200Afg, four hours) leave from a depot on the southern outskirts of town.

A further 40km south of Pul-e Khumri is the small town of Doshi on the Anderab river, where the back road from Bamiyan joins the main highway. This stretch of road is particularly attractive in summer, with the green farmland following the river until the road snakes up into the Koh-e Daman mountains, heading for the Salang Pass (p112).

## KUNDUZ

کندز

The largely Uzbek and Tajik town of Kunduz lies amid rich agricultural land, and is one of Afghanistan's most stable and thriving towns. The well-watered plains that surround it are ideal for growing rice, while the dusty loess hills to the north near the Tajikistan border turn emerald green at the first hint of the spring rains. Although there are few attractions to see in the town, it's a relaxing place to rest up on the road and a useful hub for those aiming for Badakhshan or Tajikistan.

Not all travellers' reports have been so favourable. In *The Road to Oxiana*, Robert Byron approvingly quotes a proverb of the time stating that 'a visit to Kunduz is tantamount to suicide'. When north Afghanistan fractured into city-states in the early 19th century, Kunduz was ruled by the slave-raiding Murad Beg. He was the most powerful and murderous of the northern khans, dealing with Kabul and Bukhara as equals. And if the slavers didn't get you, the fever-ridden marshes probably would. Malaria remains a problem in the area today.

Many settlers didn't come to Kunduz by choice either. The town has a large Pashtun

minority, Ghilzais from the east who were forcibly relocated here in the 1890s as part of Abdur Rahman Khan's plans to weaken his tribal enemies. Thirty years later the population exploded again with an influx of Uzbek and Tajiks fleeing the expanding Soviet presence in Central Asia.

Kunduz was the scene of fierce resistance by the Taliban in November 2001 and was the first base for the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) mandate outside Kabul, with a German-run Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). Although largely peaceful today, the Hezb-e Islami party has a sizeable presence in the area – Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (p186) was born in the province – and there have been occasional incidents involving anti-government violence.

## Information

**Haqkhawa Internet** (Sarakh-e Iman Sahib; per hr 60Afg) On first floor of building.

**Kabul Bank** (cnr of Jad-e Haji Ghani) Has a branch of Western Union.

**Moneychangers** (Chowk-e Kunduz) Several money-changers' stalls are just north of the main square.

## Sights

The remains of Murad Beg's **fort**, the Bala Hissar, are on the outskirts of town off the main road heading north. Nothing remains inside, but the walls give decent views over the town. Also of interest are the grounds of the **Takharistan Madrasa**, west of the square on Sarakh-e Spinzar. The large mosque inside has recently been restored, and respectful visitors are usually welcomed. The land around Kunduz is ideal for raising horses, so it's no surprise that from late autumn to spring, *buzkashi* is popular in the town.

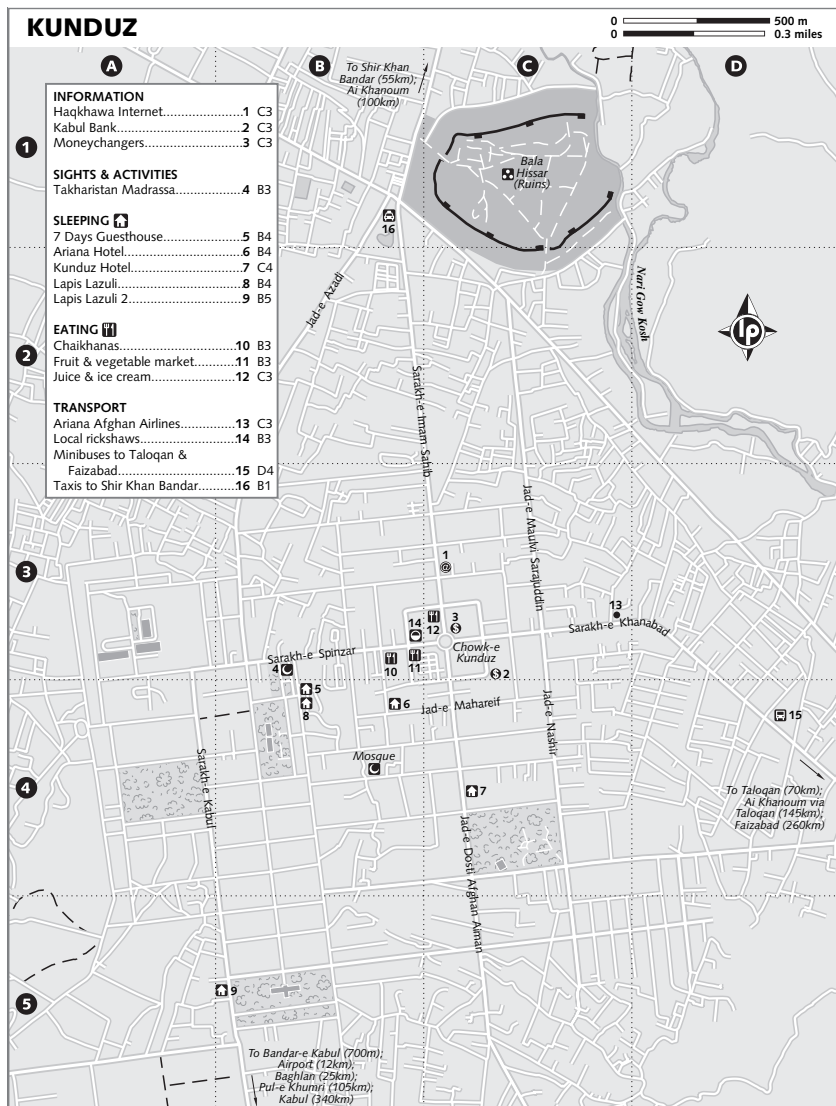
## Sleeping & Eating

At the time of writing, chaikhana owners were banned by the police from taking foreigners as guests in Kunduz.

**Ariana Hotel** (☎ 070 274712; Jad-e Mahareif; s/d/tr US\$10/20/30) This basic hotel is the best cheap option in Kunduz. All rooms have attached bathrooms, which are kept reason-

ably clean, although many of the fixtures are pretty ragged. Rooms look onto a busy central courtyard, and there's an attached wedding hall that could potentially make this a noisy option for light sleepers.

**Kunduz Hotel** (☎ 075 5505 702; kunduz\_hotel@yahoo.com; Jad-e Dosti Afghan Aiman; s/d US\$50/60; ☼) If you're after a solid Afghan business-class





hotel, this is it. Set in large grounds, the rooms are equally spacious, all with a fridge and a bathroom with water heater. Another popular option for wedding parties.

**Lapis Lazuli** (☎ 079 9209 503; Jad-e Kulali; s/d incl breakfast & dinner US\$45/70; ☺) A joint Afghan-German guesthouse, this is deservedly popular with international workers. Rooms are tidy if sometimes small, and bathrooms are shared. Advance booking is recommended, although a second guesthouse (Lapis Lazuli 2) is being opened to accommodate further guests. The food is a big draw though – the restaurant (open 12pm to 2pm and 6pm to 10pm; mains from US\$6) has good meat and pasta dishes, but head here for the ‘all you can eat’ Monday barbecue from 7pm to fill your plate with German sausage, chicken and meat, and great bowls of delicious salads. There’s even draught German lager.

**7 Days Guesthouse** (☎ 079 9362 992; www.7days-international.com; Jad-e Kulali; s/d US\$50/100; ☺) Next door to Lapis Lazuli, this is an unpretentious place also aimed at expats. Rooms are large, and have attached bathrooms with plenty of hot water. The management is extremely helpful, and can organise simple meals for guests, taken in a garden lit up with fairy lights. A small swimming pool was being dug when we visited.

**Chaikhana**s (Sarakh-e Spinjar; dishes from 50Afg) For the usual kebabs, *pulao* and *shorwa*, there are plenty of chaikhana clustered west of the main square. Decent fare but no great surprises.

**Juice and ice cream** (Sarakh-e Iman Sahib; refreshments from 20Afg) Immediately north of the main square, there are several juice stands and shops selling hand-churned ice cream. The usual caveats about where the ice comes from aside, they’re a great way to cool down on a hot Kunduz day.

There are plenty of fruit and vegetable sellers near Chowk-e Kunduz.

## Getting There & Away

**Ariana Afghan Airlines** (Sarakh-e Khanabad) normally fly on Sunday and Tuesday to Kabul but the schedule is a very moveable feast. The airport is 12km south of Kunduz, 200Afg by taxi.

Minibuses and shared taxis to Kabul (400Afg, 10 hours), Pul-e Khumri (80Afg, 90 minutes) and Mazar-e Sharif (350Afg, five hours) depart from Bandar-e Kabul

terminal on the road south out of Kunduz. Transport south from Kunduz often stops at the picturesque sugar-producing town of Baghlan. The chaikhana opposite the pleasantly leafy town square are a relaxing place to break the journey.

Shared taxi to Shir Khan Bandar (80Afg, one hour) for the Tajikistan border leave from opposite the Bala Hissar. For more on crossing this border, see p216.

East of the main square, there are minibuses to Taloqan (50Afg, one hour) and Faizabad (500Afg, 10 hours). Taloqan is another pleasant tree-lined town, with little to do but drink tea and visit the bazaar. One-time capital of the Northern Alliance, it has seen sizeable Iranian funding – note the street signs named for ayatollahs. The sealed road finishes soon after Taloqan, after which it’s an extremely bumpy (though very beautiful) ride into Badakhshan.

## AI KHANOU

آی خانم

In 1961, King Zahir Shah was hunting in the area where the Kokcha River meets the Amu Darya when his party discovered some intriguing archaeological remains. He could never have anticipated that his accident would reveal the site of the eastern-most ancient Greek city in the world.

Ai Khanoum (‘Moon Lady’ in Uzbek) is presumed to be Alexandria-Oxiana, founded by Alexander the Great during his campaigns in the 4th century BC. It’s strategic location on a hill overlooking the confluence of the rivers is so immediately apparent it convinces you that Alexander must indeed have stood here.

The site stretches around 2km along the banks of the Amu Darya. Excavation in the 1960s and ’70s revealed a temple complex, palace with administrative quarter, theatre, gymnasium and necropolis. Several coin hoards and many statues were also recovered, including an inscription from the Oracles of Delphi haughtily exhorting readers the correct way to live their lives (still in the Kabul Museum – see p88).

Having lain hidden for centuries, the years since discovery have not been kind. Frankly, the site is a mess. Myriad robber holes dot the landscape like giant rabbit holes, reminders that when the war came, so did the looters. Anyone but the keenest archaeological mind will need a lot of

### A HISTORY TOLD THROUGH COINS

Hellenistic Bactria left few written records. The historians of the day followed Greece and its big players, not the distant high tide marks of empire. Luckily the new city-states left much of their history in the coins they struck. Early 19th century Great Gamers like Charles Masson were the first to note bilingual Greek/Indian coinage, prompting academics to throw new light on the Hellenistic east.

Covering the three centuries following the departure of Alexander the Great, the coin hoards regularly dug up in north Afghanistan have revealed Hellenistic Bactria as a constantly tumbling succession of kings. Some rulers pop up to disappear almost instantly, while a lucky few had long reigns, evidenced by the ageing portraits shown on their coins. The portraits show the fusion of Greek clothing styles and haircuts with Eastern innovations, such as elephant-head helmets. One hoard found near Kunduz in the 1940s contained the largest Greek coins ever minted, the 84g double decadrachmas, featuring Zeus and the Persian god Mithras.

Later coins struck show a civilisation on its last legs. The Greek language is debased, and Indian iconography increasingly common. The continuing use of the ancient gods hides the fact that the Graeco-Bactrians had converted to Buddhism, a last grasp at renewing their vigour, but one that couldn't protect them from the encroaching nomadic warriors from the north.

imagination to see the site as an ancient city. Almost no visible historic remains can be seen. The site hasn't been completely trashed, however, and French archaeologists have received permission to carry out a more delicate variety of excavation, particularly in the area around the acropolis and citadel that sit atop the hill.

Despite this, the Ai Khanoum is still worth visiting for the scenery. A shingle beach sits at the confluence that would make a fine place for a picnic. On the Afghan side the land sweeps away into wide plains dotted with trees, while the Tajik border is marked by high ochre cliffs and the strong broad flow of the Amu Darya. There's certainly a romance to the area.

An hour's drive from Ai Khanoum, heading north from Dasht-e Qala is the town of **Khwaja Bahauddin**, the final headquarters of Ahmad Shah Massoud, pinned back by the Taliban in 2001. It was here on 9 September 2001 that he was murdered by two Al-Qaeda operatives posing as journalists. Locals will point out with a heavy heart the building where he died. While here, also look out for the traffic island with the Corinthian columns looted from Ai Khanoum; there are more in a nearby chaikhana.

### Getting There & Away

Hiring a car is the simplest way to get to Ai Khanoum. The route via Taloqan is the easiest. From Kunduz the route is spectacular over some crazy dunes, but it's easy

to get lost so it's essential that the driver know where he's going. We were quoted around US\$80 for a return trip from Kunduz, around 3½ hours each way. The route passes through the small town of Khwaja Gar and crosses the Kokcha River at Pul-e Kokcha (look for the spectacularly crashed plane near the bridge, the site of the old Taliban/Northern Alliance front line). The road turns west at Dasht-e Qala, following the river a further 5km to Ai Khanoum – the hill at the confluence is on the outskirts of the village of the same name.

Public transport is a challenge. From Taloqan, minibuses run by erratic schedules to Dasht-e Qala, but you'll need to arrange the last leg from there, probably hiring a vehicle outright. Roads are poor throughout this route.

## BADAKHSHAN بدخشان

The northeastern province of Badakhshan has always sat slightly apart from the rest of Afghanistan. As the plains become scrunched up into a knot of mountains, and the Hindu Kush collides with the Pamir range, the distance from Kabul seems to be measured in centuries as much as miles.

Badakhshan's history as well as its geography reveals this independent streak. A far outpost of the Achaemenid empire, by the medieval period it was recognised as a sovereign state, its wealth deriving from

the trade routes through the mountains between China, Kashmir and Bukhara. Timur tried and failed to subdue it, while his successors sent embassies instead. In the 19th century Badakhshan was finally subsumed into the Afghan state but even Abdur Rahman Khan balked at having to rule it properly. The Wakhan Corridor, that panhandle of land sticking into China, was only forced on him when the British and Russians decided they needed a buffer between their empires. A century later, Badakhshan was the only part of Afghanistan to resist capture by the Taliban.

It is the scenery that attracts visitors today. The provincial capital of Faizabad provides a gateway to some of the country's most sublime landscapes, from the Kuchi pastures of Lake Shewa to the Pamirs themselves, home of the last nomadic Kyrgyz on earth, in mountains so high that Marco Polo claimed that even birds couldn't fly there. Of equal inspiration to the truly intrepid are the mines of Sar-e Sang, source of most of the world's lapis lazuli. Badakhshan also serves as an entry point to Tajikistan and, potentially, northern Pakistan.

Visitors should be aware that Badakhshan is second only to Helmand for opium production. Controlled by Northern Alliance, opium is the backbone of the local economy. Ironically, security is generally fairly good in the province, but you should be extremely circumspect with cameras and questions if travelling in an area with poppy cultivation. When there have been security problems in Badakhshan, these have tended to coincide with eradication programmes, when being a foreigner in certain areas isn't necessarily a popular thing to be.

## FAIZABAD

### فیض آباد

Astride the fast-flowing Kokcha River, Faizabad is a largely Tajik town, home to the rump Afghan government during the Taliban era. It's an amiable place with a traditional bazaar, and is good to catch your breath for a few days if travelling to or from the Wakhan Corridor or the Tajikistan border.

The town has been the capital of Badakhshan since the 17th century. Its name ('Blessed Abode') is taken from the cloak of the Prophet Mohammed that was brought here by the ruling mir of the time. The cloak is now kept in a mosque in Kandahar (p193).

The bazaar in the old town follows the street pattern set out during this time, a winding mass of roughly pitted streets between the main square and the river. The bazaar is of great interest to travellers, and knitted socks make good souvenirs. On the street west of the main square there are several lapis lazuli dealers. The blue stone is brought here from Sar-e Sang (p166), although the best goes to Kabul. A kilo of medium quality lapis will set you back around US\$100 here. Some jewellery is also made locally, but is generally of inferior quality next to what's available in the capital.

Faizabad has a pleasant climate, its heat moderated by breezes off the river. Given that it's an entry point to the mountains, it's a surprise that it sits at just 1200m – lower than Kabul. The town is particularly pretty in spring and early summer, when the fields and slopes sing with greenery. TV Hill, overlooking the old town, is worth climbing for great views. Nauroz is an interesting time to be here, as the holiday is usually followed by 10 days of *buzkashi* held on the field at the edge of Shahr-e Nau.

## Orientation

Faizabad is divided by the Kokcha River, which is crossed by two bridges. The main road in and out of town is on the west bank, passing through the new city (Shahr-e Nau, where most NGO offices are based). The Old Town is on the east bank, centred on a main square (the tall telephone tower is a handy landmark). The main bazaar street runs southeast from here, leading to the southern bridge. Minibuses (15Afg) run throughout the day between the Old Town and Shahr-e Nau, via the northern bridge. From the south, Faizabad is overlooked by Jilgar Mountain – a corruption of '40 concubines', legendarily ascribed to Genghis Khan when he campaigned here. Faizabad airport is 3.5km west of town, along the main road.

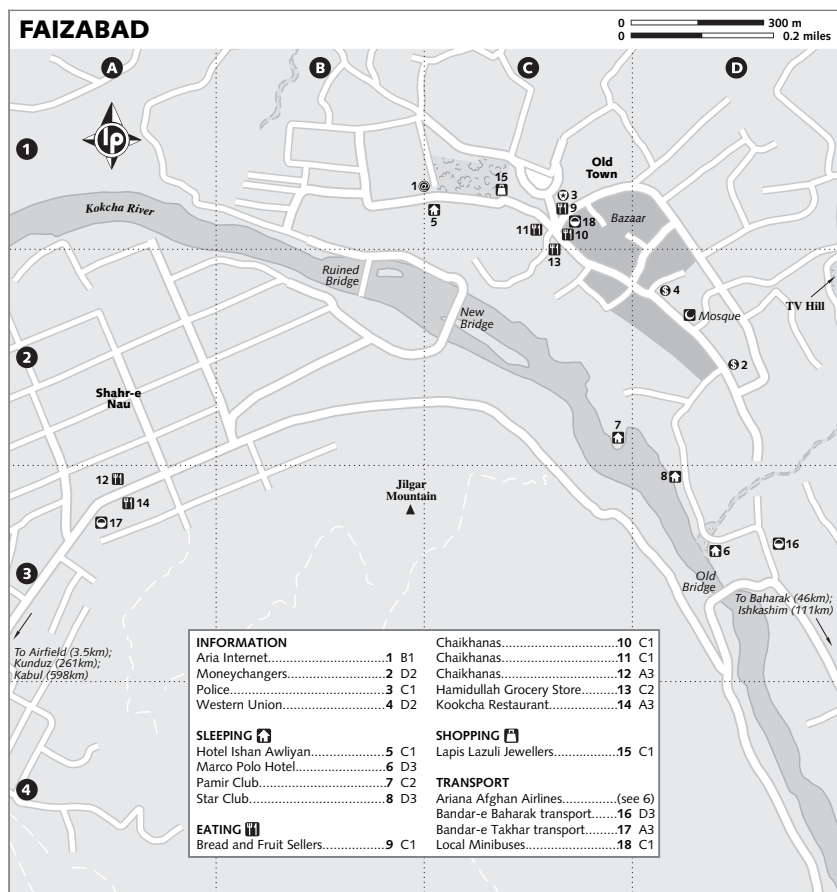
## Information

**Aria Internet** (west of main square, Old Town; per hr 100Afg)

**Great Game Travel** (☎ 079 9062 033; faizabad@greatgame.travel; Old Town) Branch of Kabul-based travel company; can organise permits, translators and vehicle hire.

**Police** (Main Sq, Old Town)

**Western Union** (main bazaar, Old Town) Several money-changers also along this street.



## Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation options in Faizabad are pretty restricted, and though the quality isn't great, several are on the river, allowing the rushing water to soothe you to sleep. Hotels can generally offer meals if requested in advance, otherwise eating out isn't Faizabad's most exciting pastime.

**Pamir Club** (☎ 079 9443 117; Kokcha River, Old Town; r US\$40) If there's a hotel with a better location in Afghanistan, we'd like to know about it. On a promontory surrounded on three sides by the rushing Kokcha River, this government hotel has a hard spot to beat. Rooms are large and reasonably decent with balconies looking over the water, and have shared bathrooms (don't hope too hard

for hot water). Management can rustle up a meal, but are generally resentful of having guests stay at all.

**Marco Polo Hotel** (☎ 079 9279 018; near southern bridge, Old Town; r US\$20) Also known as Number One Guesthouse, this is a basic hotel with hard beds. The shared bathrooms are pretty basic, with squat toilets, but there's a pleasant garden that overlooks the river.

**Hotel Ishan Awliyan** (West of main square, Old Town; r 300Afg) One step up from a chaikhana, this 1st-floor hotel has a handful of private rooms with two beds and a beaten-up sofa apiece – a little dingy but perfectly serviceable. Meals are in the main restaurant, and a new toilet block was being built when we visited.

**Star Club** (Kokcha River, Old Town; r around US\$20) Reportedly offering similar accommodation to the Marco Polo Hotel, the Star Club was temporarily closed at the time of research. It's right on the river, slightly upstream from the Pamir Club.

**Chaikhanas** (Main Sq, Old Town; meals from 50Afg) A host of chaikhanas are clustered along the southern edge of the main square – offering exactly what you'd expect from such places.

**Kookcha Restaurant** (Shahr-e Nau; meals from 60Afg) Here's something blessedly different: chicken and chips. Almost finger-lickin', but after a diet of meat and rice definitely worth the trek to Shahr-e Nau. 'China soup' with noodles is also on offer. Look for the green restaurant front. There are several more standard chaikhanas along the same stretch of the main road.

Self-caterers should head for the main bazaar street running off the main square. Hamidullah grocery store here has a good selection on imported goods, if you're craving chocolate. On the main square, under what looks like a large bus shelter, there are plenty of fresh bread and fruit sellers.

## Getting There & Away

**Ariana Afghan Airlines** (☎ 079 9175 338; in Marco Polo Hotel) fly to Kabul (2500Afg, one hour) three times a week. Go to the office the day before travel to get your name on the manifest, then again on the morning of departure to confirm they're still flying and to get your ticket. Kam Air is reportedly setting up flights to Kabul.

Minibuses and shared taxis for all points outside of Badakhshan depart from the Bandar-e Takhar station in Shahr-e Nau. The main destinations are Taloqan (500Afg, nine hours), Kunduz (550Afg, 10 hours), Pul-e Khumri (600Afg, 12 hours) and Kabul (800Afg, 1½ days, overnighing in Pul-e Khumri).

To get further into Badakhshan, go to Bandar-e Baharak in the old town. HiAces leave for Baharak (150Afg, two hours), Ishkashim (600Afg, eight hours) and Jurm (250Afg, four hours) from here. Travel beyond Ishkashim requires a permit – for more information see p168.

Vehicle hire in Faizabad and throughout Badakhshan is expensive – around US\$200 per day.

## LAKE SHEWA

جهیل شیوه

Three hours (80km) from Faizabad, hard against the Tajikistan border, is the beautiful Lake Shewa. One of the sources of the Amu Darya, the wide pastures that surround it are the main summer grazing grounds of the northeastern Kuchis.

Every May, Kuchi families arrive in their hundreds around the lake with their flocks. It's a time for weddings and *buzkashi*, and there could hardly be a better landscape for such pursuits – high peaks and wide green meadows. The lake itself is a dazzling blue and large enough, we were told, that 'you can't shoot a Kalashnikov across it'. A complete trek around would take two days.

Your own vehicle is required to get to Lake Shewa, and you'll need a local guide to introduce you to the Kuchi so that you can set up camp (and to restrain their fierce dogs if necessary). The lake is accessible until October, although the nomads tend to leave for their winter grounds by September. Even if you don't make it here, if you're travelling at this time you're likely to pass their caravans on the road all the way to Kunduz.

## SOUTH TO THE ANJOMAN PASS

This route is for the most adventurous, travelling from Faizabad along the Kokcha River to the Anjoman Pass, leading to the Panjshir Valley. Its main attraction is Sar-e Sang, the oldest worked mines in the world, and the source of Afghanistan's – and the ancient world's – lapis lazuli. Like the rest of Badakhshan, travel is only really an option from late spring to early autumn.

From Faizabad, it's easy to get to the junction town of Baharak (150Afg, two hours) by public minibus. The road splits here, with the southern fork heading for the town of Jurm (250Afg, four hours). It's a poor road but a busy one: most farmers here grow poppies, and aside from cultivation, it's believed that the raw paste is refined into opium in local labs. It's essential to get trustworthy security information in Faizabad before travelling this road; we were advised that travelling in public transport decreases the chances of being mistaken for officials involved in eradication.

Sar-e Sang is around another three hours from Jurm. It's a one-street town along a valley, with around 20 tunnels currently

being worked for lapis. There's a chaikhana, but it's worth remembering this is a rough-and-ready mining place. The nearest mines are a stiff two to three hour walk from Sar-e Sang. The shafts are 250m deep in places. The lapis is sent either to Kabul, or by horse over the passes to Pakistan. In ancient times, the seams were mined by lighting fires in the tunnels, and then packing the hot rock with snow to crack it. More recent techniques involve using military munitions, although the uncontrolled explosions damage the highest quality lapis.

The track continues for 30km to the fertile valley of Iskazer, the last major settlement in Badakhshan. Iskazer can be reached from Faizabad in around 10 hours by 4WD in summer. From here it's a further six hours to the Anjoman Pass (4430m). The vistas from here are sublime, to the Panjshir, Nuristan, and even as far as Pakistan. The road descends into the Panjshir Valley (p110), where the sometimes paranoid Panjshiri security officials will be extremely surprised to see you.

## ISHKASHIM

اشكاشم

The small town of Ishkashim sits on the Panj River near the entrance to the Wakhan Corridor, as well as on the border crossing into Tajikistan. It's a place to take stock before heading deeper into the mountains.

There are several basic guesthouses in Ishkashim, which seem to regularly change name – you need to ask for them by owner. All charge around US\$20 per person per

night. A new guesthouse run by Edi and Boz Muhammad is reportedly good, as is Wafai's Guesthouse. Ayanbeg's Guesthouse has had mixed reviews from international workers passing through.

Minibuses leave daily for Faizabad (600Afg, eight hours), via Baharak (400Afg, six hours). Note that the road between Ishkashim and Baharak passes through large areas of poppy cultivation, so you're advised to stay in your vehicle and not go exploring. Between Baharak and Faizabad there's no poppy. For information on heading into the Wakhan Corridor, see below. A bridge crosses the river into Tajikistan. The border is open Monday to Thursday – see p216 for more details.

## WAKHAN & THE AFGHAN PAMIR

واخان و پامير افغانستان

Afghanistan's Wakhan District is a narrow strip of land that juts eastwards 350km between Tajikistan and Pakistan to touch the Chinese border. Wakhan District has two distinct parts – the Wakhan Corridor and the Afghan Pamir.

The deep valley of the **Wakhan Corridor** is formed by the Panj River as it courses between the lofty mountains of Tajikistan to the north and the snowcapped Hindu Kush Range with 38 summits higher than 7000m to the south. Wakhan is the homeland of 12,000 Wakhi people who live in year-round villages along the Panj River's south bank and its upper tributary, the Wakhan River, where they cultivate wheat, barley, peas, potatoes and a few apricot trees.

### LAPIS LAZULI

It's thought that the mines of Sar-e Sang have been worked for over 7000 years, the most important source of lapis lazuli in the world. The gemstone's deep royal blue colour comes from the mineral lazzerite, often flecked with gold pyrite and veins of white calcite. Its Persian name, *lajward*, is the origin of the word azure, while the painters of Renaissance Europe knew it as ultramarine, grinding it up to make their most expensive pigments.

Lapis was an important luxury good in the ancient world, and trade networks reached from Badakhshan to Sumer (Iraq) and Egypt, where it was prized for its beads and amulets. The lapis lazuli in Tutankhamen's death mask was mined at Sar-e Sang. Wars were even fought to protect the trade routes.

In the 20th century, the Afghan government exerted a monopoly over the trade, but this collapsed soon after the Soviet invasion. Far from the reach of Kabul, the mujaheddin took over the mines, and traded the rock for guns in the bazaars of Chitral and Peshawar in Pakistan. These powerful interests still control the mines today, with precious little of the profits reaching the Afghan people who would benefit most from this highly lucrative and ancient trade.

The Hindu Kush, Karakoram and Pamir ranges converge in the **Afghan Pamir**, known in Persian as the Bam-e Dunya ('roof of the world'). *Pamir*, U-shaped, high-elevation valleys with lush seasonal meadows and vivid blue lakes, are renowned as summer grazing grounds, but lie snow-covered for more than six months of the year. The Afghan Pamir includes two such grasslands – the Big Pamir and the Little Pamir. Only occasional clusters of shrubs or willow, birch and other small trees break the vast landscape.

A vital branch of the Silk Road flowed through Wakhan. Petroglyphs depicting warriors, hunting scenes, caravans and Buddhist history, along with the occasional *rabot* (travellers' shelter), bear silent witness to the tracks of tradition, and the rich heritage that once traversed remote Wakhan. Trekking is by far the most popular way to experience the natural beauty and cultural diversity of Wakhan, and the only way to visit the roadless Afghan Pamir.

## Practicalities

### PERMISSION

Permission is required for travel anywhere in Wakhan District. A separate trekking permit is not required.

The process for getting permission changes with some regularity, so cover all your bases. Firstly, in Kabul contact the ATO (p86), who can liaise with government ministries and issue a letter for you to present at government offices in Faizabad and Ishkashim. Second, in Faizabad contact **Engineer Mohammad Deen** (☎ 079 9418 060) at the government's tourist information centre who issues a letter for authorities in Ishkashim. Third, in Ishkashim go to the Border Security Force and the police. The Border Security Force's commander, currently Mir Abdul Wahid Khan, issues another letter of permission to visit Wakhan (and the Afghan Pamir if you want to visit the Big Pamir and/or Little Pamir). He may or may not issue a letter without other letters from Kabul and/or Faizabad. The police in Ishkashim can radio permission to police posts up-valley, although this system is prone to technical breakdowns.

You may be asked to show the letter(s) at various places, but most certainly at the checkpoint in Qila-e Panja and in Sarhad-e

Broghil. If you don't have permission, you'll be sent back to Ishkashim.

### WHEN TO GO

May to September is the optimal trekking season. Snowmelt in July and early August, however, swells rivers whose high water can block the sole road. By mid-August, it becomes easier to drive through the rivers. Infamously fierce winds known as *bad-e Wakhan* blow year round, fuelling dust storms. It can snow any month of the year in the Afghan Pamir and by mid-September passes can close.

### GUIDES & PORTERS

Wakhan has no fully qualified guides, although handfuls of young men are receiving training in basic mountaineering skills, trek operations, cooking, and English. The daily wage for someone with some training starts at 500Afg.

Hiring a local person with their pack animal (donkey, horse, yak or camel) to transport your gear, help with river crossings, and show the way is the best approach. Villages have a rotational system to equitably assign work. The daily rate in the Afghan Pamir has been fixed at 800Afg, and Nushaq Base Camp at 1000Afg, although it may be possible to negotiate. For some treks, it can be more cost effective to buy an animal (eg a donkey costs between US\$150 and US\$200), manage it yourself, and sell it afterwards.

Distances in the Afghan Pamir are vast, so you'll likely want to hop a ride during part of your trek. Yaks transport gear and are useful for crossing rivers. Horses are also good mounts on trails, but not on snow. Donkeys are sturdy, but cannot cross deep or swift rivers, and often struggle on passes. In winter when rivers are frozen solid, it's possible to move on the ice in traditional caravans of Bactrian camels.

In Kyrgyz areas, it's common to travel on horseback and you'll likely be asked to hire a Kyrgyz while traversing these areas. Consider retaining a Wakhi person, however, as Kyrgyz people sometimes don't want to travel as far from their homesteads as you may want to go. It's usual for Kyrgyz to ride horses rather than walk, but it's not generally expected for you to pay additional charges for horses they ride. It's also acceptable to pay a proportion of the daily wage for part-days worked.

## SLEEPING & EATING

Although village leaders traditionally extend hospitality to guests, travellers should not rely on such generosity in an impoverished society. Minimise your impact by bringing a sleeping bag and tent, and as much food as possible. The local diet of bread and tea, with occasional rice, dairy and meat, is unlikely to be sufficient for most foreign trekkers. Villages have little or no excess food to sell, so plan to cache some food for after your trek.

Most Kyrgyz camps will have a *mehman khana* (guesthouse) or guest yurt, primarily used by local traders. They too welcome anyone to stay and may provide blankets, but these communal sleeping areas aren't appropriate for women and frequently have vermin.

Hot springs with bath houses at Shelk, Sargez and Sarhad-e Broghil, and a few hot springs in the Afghan Pamir (in Alisu and near Chagmaqin) provide the only hot water for bathing.

Tourism infrastructure in Wakhan is developing quickly. Newly built guesthouses (with dorms and private rooms) and camping grounds are in Qazideh, Khandud, Goz Khun, Qila-e Panja and Sarhad-e Broghil. Initially priced for NGO employees rather than tourists, competition is now bringing prices down to about 500Afg per night. Be prepared for tough negotiations. A fee of 100Afg per tent is appropriate for pitching your tent in village camping grounds. Elsewhere there is no camping fee.

## WHAT TO BRING

Self-reliance is essential, so bring all the cooking and camping gear you need. Limited food (eg rice, flour, lentils, potatoes, onions, tea, sugar, cooking oil, spices, etc) and supplies (eg stove, pressure cooker, cooking pots, utensils, toilet paper, matches, etc) are available in Faizabad, Baharak and, minimally so, in Ishkashim and Khandud. Kerosene, used for aviation fuel, is available only in Kabul and Faizabad. Propane gas in 5kg cylinders is available in Faizabad and Ishkashim. Sheep and goats are readily purchased from herders.

## Getting There & Away

Allow two days to drive the 200km-long road between Ishkashim and Sarhad-e

Broghil, stopping overnight in Khandud or Qila-e Panja. Special hires cost US\$100 per day. Drivers may try to charge for extra days by driving too slowly or because of vehicle breakdowns.

Hire an experienced driver with a 4WD who has previously been to Wakhan and knows how to drive through rivers. Don't hire a Toyota Town-Ace if you're going beyond Khandud. High water, particularly in Ish Murg, may force an overnight in Khandud and can block the road anywhere beyond Khandud. Be prepared to leave the vehicle and travel onwards by foot or horseback at any time.

## Lower Wakhan

More than 5000m of vertical relief commands the southern horizon of Lower Wakhan, the villages between Ishkashim and Qila-e Panja, where the valley is only 2km across at its widest point. Snowcapped peaks soar majestically above villages and glaciers descend precipitously to feed the Panj River in this land of immense scale. Afghan urial and ibex thrive in numerous steep and arid side valleys.

## QAZIDEH

Qazideh is 20km and less than one hour's drive from Ishkashim. Qazideh Campsite, in the shaded garden of Pir Shah Langar, offers a pleasant, spacious and secure compound to pitch tents. A nearby building provides a safe place for expeditions to store gear. Close by is Madam Bar's house, a several-hundred-year-old home that is a living museum of traditional Wakhi culture.

## NOSHAQ BASE CAMP

The base camp of Noshag (7492m), Afghanistan's highest summit and the second highest peak in the Hindu Kush, is one of Wakhan's best and most easily accessible treks. Trekking to base camp (4450m) is the only way to see Noshag, which is hidden from view up a narrow side valley. From the trailhead at Qazideh (2800m), the moderate five-day, round-trip trek unveils superb close-up views of four 7000m peaks.

## KHANDUD

Khandud, 82km from Ishkashim, is Wakhan District's headquarters, with a police post and government offices. The bazaar is



the last place to buy food and basic supplies. The semi-ruined, domed tomb of Fateh Ali Shah is an evocative village landmark called **Ras Malack**. Khandood Campsite, a three-minute walk from the road, is a grassy compound in the village.

### QILA-E PANJA

Qila-e Panja, 28km from Khandud, is a large village and home to Pir Shah Ismail, the spiritual leader of Islamis in Wakhan. Nearby the border police checkpoint is the **former hunting lodge** of Afghanistan's last king Zahir Shah. Qila-e Panja (Fort of Panja) was the capital of the former kingdom of Wakhan, and ruins of two forts are near the river. Qila-e Panja, as an historically significant site, also has the sacred shrine of Panja Shah, which is maintained by descendants of the last Mir of Wakhan.

Qila-e-Panjah Camp Site is really a plantation with room to pitch tents between rows of trees. The fenced compound provides a much needed wind break, although water is several minutes' walk away.

### Upper Wakhan

The Wakhi villages in Upper Wakhan between Qila-e Panja and Sarhad-e Broghil lie along the narrow Wakhan River, which opens to a dramatic 3km-wide river basin at Sarhad-e Broghil. Wetlands along the river are nesting grounds for geese, ducks and ibises, as well as stopovers for migratory waterfowl and raptors, and marshy flats provide year-round habitat for wading birds.

Wakhi, who depend on livestock to supplement their agriculture, take their herds to seasonal pastures as high as 4500m, where they greet guests with a warm smile, cup of tea and bowl of yogurt.

### QILA-E PANJA TO SARHAD-E BROGHIL

The easy walk 90km along the road from Qila-e Panja to Sarhad-e Broghil offers an opportunity to visit friendly villages while acclimatising for longer treks. The main road stays on the Wakhan River's north-side east of Sast, but you can vary the route by crossing the bridge to the river's south bank between Sargez and Baba Tungi, and recrossing to the main road on the bridge between Kret and Rorung.

Less expensive than driving, walking is the only way to go when the road is flooded

or blocked by landslides. It takes four days, camping overnight in Shelk or Sargez, Kret and Neshtkhawar or other nearby villages, with good views of snowcapped Baba Tungi (6513m) along the way. You don't have to always walk on the road itself as some very pleasant trails connect villages in a straight line. You may consider buying a donkey.

### BROGHIL PASS

The broad, grassy Broghil Pass (3882m), on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, is the lowest pass across the Hindu Kush range. It is an easy day trip from Nirs on foot or horseback. A half-day side trip on foot to an ancient Tibetan fort high above Korkut reveals breathtaking valley views. (Warning: crossing the Broghil Pass into Pakistan is not permitted.)

### SARHAD-E BROGHIL

Sarhad-e Broghil (3290m), 90km from Qila-e Panja, marks the road's end and the trailhead for treks to the Little Pamir. Qach Beg Guest House has an expansive, grassy area for camping in front of the building. Arbob Toshi Boy's Guesthouse is in a tiny, walled compound at the village's eastern end. Cold springs throughout the village provide drinking water.

### Big Pamir

The 60km long Big Pamir nestles between the Southern Alichur Range to the north and the Wakhan Range to the south. The Big Pamir or Great Pamir is called Past Pamir in Wakhi, and Pamir-e Kalan or Pamir-e Buzurg in Persian.

### GOZ KHUN

Goz Khun (2900m), 11km west of Sast bridge, is the primary trailhead for treks to the Big Pamir. Two guesthouses with the same name, Goz Khan Guesthouse, also have areas for tents.

### ZORKOL

Zorkol, the Persian name for the lake that 19th-century British explorers called Lake Victoria, is the Afghan Pamir's largest lake at 20km by 5km. Two routes via the Big Pamir lead to the lake, which lies on the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, each taking eight days.

### KYRGYZ OF THE AFGHAN PAMIR *John Mock & Kimberley O'Neil*

Central Asia's Altai mountains along Mongolia's western border are the traditional home of the Kyrgyz, a Turkic pastoral nomadic group. Each summer, small bands of Kyrgyz would migrate from lower valleys in Central Asia to the Afghan Pamir, but following the 1917 Soviet revolution, several thousand Kyrgyz settled permanently in the Afghan Pamir. Their once wide-ranging migration became a series of short, seasonal movements between 4000m and 4500m within the Afghan Pamir's closed frontiers. Kyrgyz nomads live in felt yurts, which they move seasonally according to available grasslands, sunlight and shelter from wind. Kyrgyz tend herds of sheep, goats, yaks and camels, and trade with Wakhi neighbours or travelling merchants for all their needs not supplied by livestock. Following the Soviet-backed 1978 coup in Afghanistan, some 1300 Kyrgyz, led by Haji Rahman Qul, left the Afghan Pamir for Pakistan and in 1982 resettled in eastern Turkey. Today, only about 1500 remaining Kyrgyz preserve this vanishing lifestyle.

The demanding 150km-long high route, which starts from Sargez, crosses three challenging passes between 4400m and 4800m, goes through the Wakhi summer settlements of Istimoch, Shikargah, Alisu, and Jermasirt, and offers wildlife watching in the Big Pamir Wildlife Reserve.

A more moderate route along the Pamir River, which starts from Goz Khun, has pleasant scenery, more gradual acclimatisation, and avoids crossing high passes. Several side valleys link this river route to the high route offering many variations.

### SPREG SHIR UWEEN & KOTAL-E SHAUR

This 65km-long route between Upper Wakhan and Zorkol is a demanding five-day trek, but offers some of the most impressive high mountain scenery anywhere in Wakhan. It crosses two passes and visits Wakhi summer settlements before reaching Kyrgyz territory near Zorkol. The flower-carpeted Spreng Shir Uween (4723m) just north of Sarhad-e Broghil has outstanding views south to the Hindu Raj Range and leads north to an alpine basin dotted with turquoise lakes.

Crossing Kotal-e Shaur (4890m) involves a short, nontechnical walk on snow and glacier after spending a night in a glacial cirque. This route links up with other routes to and from the Little Pamir and Big Pamir. A yak is helpful for two of the river crossings. Prior acclimatisation is essential.

### Little Pamir

The Little Pamir, at 100km long and 10km wide, is actually larger in area than the Big Pamir, yet the more rugged Big Pamir has a higher elevation and so earns its

name. The Little Pamir or Small Pamir is called Wuch Pamir in Wakhi, and Pamir-e Khurd or Pamir-e Kochak in Persian. Its most remote valleys, no longer used for grazing, are pristine alpine grasslands. Tombs called *gumbaz* with distinctive conical mud cupolas mark Kyrgyz graves. Wildlife watchers will find the area home to Marco Polo sheep, snow leopards and brown bears.

### KASHCH GOZ

Two routes to the Little Pamir and the nearest Kyrgyz camp of Kashch Goz start from Sarhad-e Broghil, the high route and the river route. The high route is longer and harder, crossing two passes, but is far more scenic. Both routes first cross grassy Daliz Pass (4267m) and descend east to Borak. Kashch Goz is a colourful cluster of yurts whose families welcome visitors.

From Borak, the high route ascends the Shpodkis Valley to the north going through Wakhi summer settlements, including Sang Nevishta with its numerous petroglyphs, to cross snow-covered Uween-e-Sar (4887m). It then turns south and east to cross the flower-carpeted Aqbelis Pass (4595m) with its large lake, and offers views of Chaqmaq-tin Lake as you descend to Kashch Goz. The demanding 90km-long route takes five days.

The moderate 65km-long trek along the Wakhan River route takes four days, following the river's north side east from Borak to Kashch Goz. The route goes past several Wakhi winter settlements near the vast plain of Langar, but is typically not used by local people in summer when it can be blocked by high water.

### CHAQMAQTIN LAKE

Chaqmaqtiin, the Afghan Pamir's second largest lake at 9km by 2km, is the source of the Murghab or Aksu River. From Kashch Goz, allow two days' round trip to visit the lake, the Kyrgyz tombs at **Bozai Gum-baz** (named for a Kyrgyz chief called Bozai who was killed in a battle with men from Hunza around 1840), and additional Kyrgyz camps. A three-day journey beyond Chaqmaqtiin leads to the Tegermansu Valley at the Little Pamir's easternmost tip.

### WAKHJIR VALLEY

The Wakhjir Valley is the primary source of the Amu Darya or Oxus River, and was the Silk Road's caravan route to Kashgar. Evidence of Kyrgyz winter camps and tombs in the lower valley yield to a remote wilderness lush with wildflowers in the upper valley. Allow three days to reach the base of the Wakhjir Pass, 60km from Kashch Goz.

### Cross-Border Routes

A cross-border trek from the Little Pamir to Pakistan's Northern Areas offers world-class adventure. In addition to visas for Afghanistan and Pakistan, special permission

is required from both governments since there are no established border crossings or immigration checkpoints. In Afghanistan, contact the ATO (p210). In Pakistan, contact the **Ministry of Tourism** (☎ 51-9213642; fax 51-9215912; secretary@tourism.gov.pk; Green Tower Trust, 11th fl, Blue Area, Islamabad). Note that all routes into Tajikistan and China are strictly off limits.

An historic trading route from the Little Pamir's Bai Qara Valley to Pakistan's Chapursan Valley crosses the snow-covered **Irshad Uween** (4979m) amidst spectacular, multicoloured rock formations. Trading continues today between the Little Pamir's Kyrgyz and Pakistan's Wakhi at the shrine of Baba Ghundi in Chapursan. This demanding 150km-long route takes eight days starting from Sarhad-e Broghil and has challenging river crossings, which can be impassable in midsummer.

Crossing the glaciated **Dilisang Pass** (5290m) is a demanding 12-day, 225km-long route for trekkers with basic mountaineering experience. From the pass, the Karakoram Range unfolds with distant views of Qarun Koh (7164m). This once-used trade route starts from Sarhad-e Broghil and goes to Misgar, via the Wakhjir Valley.

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